



The Protos: Siemens as an automobile producer

Who would have thought it? In 1986 the then CEO of Siemens AG Karlheinz Kaske made it quite clear in an interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*: “You can be sure of one thing, we will never buy an automobile firm.” Perhaps in the back of his mind was the fact that Siemens had once taken over an automobile firm but had given up the business again after a quarter of a century ... It is however indisputable that, at least in a small way, Siemens left its mark on the history of the car: the “Protos.”

Car-making basically began with Werner von Siemens: after the company’s founder had demonstrated his first electric railway in Berlin in 1879 he was also thinking beyond the further production of rail vehicles to the development of “cars for the street.” And in addition, since Werner von Siemens saw that there was still a lot of development work to be done on the electric railways, he wanted to concentrate first on the vehicles he called “Elektromote.” Because these – as he wrote in a letter to his brother Friedrich in 1881 – “would be more likely to succeed because they were cheap.”

“Elektromote” and Obus – the first step into commercial electromobility

Here the far-sighted entrepreneur was for once mistaken: there was a boom in electric railways as more and more cities wanted to modernize their local transport network with the new system.



The “Elektromote” and the trolley bus (Obus) developed on the same basis were severely impeded by the inadequate roads and the technical problems of the time. It was thus not until the beginning of the 20th century that the first commercial Obus line went into operation in Saxony.

By the end of the 19th century, Electricitäts-Aktiengesellschaft vorm. Schuckert & Co. (EAG) was already making the first cars, such as the so-called Schuckert-Droschke (Schuckert cab). In 1903 Siemens & Halske took over EAG and merged it with its own heavy current departments. The new company operated under the name of Siemens Schuckertwerke (SSW) and continued with the EAG’s car-making activities. The focus was initially on electric cars.

Once suitable accumulators for electric vehicles had been developed, in 1905/06 Siemens-Schuckertwerke established a car factory on Motardstraße in Berlin-Siemensstadt. The first models were presented one year later at the International Automobile Tradeshow in Berlin: in addition to “city cabs” like the “electric Victoria,” the range of vehicles included “delivery cars”, “hotel buses” and even an “electric truck” with a payload of around two tons. In order to acquire practical experience with the vehicles as quickly as possible, SSW began making contact with local transport companies. Up until 1911 the company even had its own transport company in Berlin which was called “Fortschritt” (progress). In Vienna it had its own electric omnibus running regularly from the inner city to the Siemens factories.



Electric vehicles on the march
– an aerial photo of the automotive plant
in Siemensstadt, Berlin, 1907



Advanced, but unprofitable at first – heavy power consumption, short range

The results of these operations were mixed: electric cars proved to be economical only under very specific conditions: on routes under 30 kilometers horse-drawn vehicles were more cost-effective, for distances over 70 kilometers vehicles with combustion engines were cheaper. In addition, bad road conditions such as hills or snowfalls immediately made electric vehicles less economic, because they then used up more electricity and could neither travel as far or as fast.

Based on this experience, at the turn of the year 1907/08, the company began manufacturing vehicles with “mixed systems” (today known as hybrid systems). This was followed shortly afterwards by the production of vehicles with combustion engines. The first vehicle of this kind was the “Typ G”, which was equipped first with a 6 hp engine and later with an 8 hp engine supplied by another company. When, however, in response to the growing demand for combustion engines in various departments of the whole company, the Blockwerk of Siemens & Halske started making its own engines, SSW stopped ordering engines from elsewhere and from 1908 used the products of its sister company.



Protos Type G II – with an internal combustion engine made in-house

Ahead of the competition – the Protos brand is a winner in the automotive market

Parallel to the technical progress, in 1908 SSW’s automobile production rapidly achieved worldwide fame through a stroke of marketing genius. The Protos motor factory in Berlin had been producing its own cars with combustion engines since 1899.



In the spring of 1908 one of its cars had won a race round the world and “Protos” became a household name. The opportunity to take over the factory that arose shortly afterwards was seized by the managers of SSW, and in the automobile factory on the Nonnendamm all the company’s cars were subsequently manufactured under the introduced brand name of Protos.

At first the company attempted to fulfill the wishes of the customers as comprehensively as possible by offering many different types of car. This strategy however required a large amount of individual and hence cost-intensive manufacture and left little room for platform solutions, let alone mass production. The range was thus soon reduced to a few passenger car models. Parallel to this, because of the increasing need for transport within the whole company, and the growing demand from customers and – from 1914 – from the military as well, SSW also began developing and producing trucks. The various types of vehicles were marketed by Protos Automobile GmbH which was founded in March 1911 and sales were conducted by authorized representatives, the Technical Bureaus of SSW and its subsidiaries abroad.



Mostly hand-crafted – making Protos cars at Nonnendamm in Berlin, 1913

However, as SSW lacked the experience and know-how of a car company, it only succeeded in operating profitably in this area because of the high demand generated by the war. Nevertheless, for years it pursued intensive development work, so that the Protos vehicles always had a good reputation among the experts. But when from 1925 on, after almost all the import restrictions had been lifted and American vehicles flooded the German market, the situation deteriorated dramatically for SSW and the Protos.



In order to compete with the mass-produced and hence cheaper American models, high investments in this uncertain business area were required. A memorandum arising from a balance sheet review recorded the following. "All the offices are complaining that the Protos business is becoming increasingly uneconomic because of the insufficient delivery capability. It is constantly emphasized how popular the Protos car is and how much profit it could make." The car factory management accordingly pressed for the necessary investment, arguing that "In our opinion capital investment is justified economically, because the Protos car has been so successful up to now that it has a guaranteed market with the corresponding manufacturing performance." In spite of this optimistic assessment, however, fiscal 1926 saw a loss of over three million reichsmarks. A circumstance that the SSW management could not ignore and which resulted in its decision half a year later to stop producing its own cars. The Protos production and its customer base was transferred to the Nationale Automobil-Gesellschaft (N.A.G.), which took over the further production of the Protos vehicles and the maintenance of the existing types after the end of the series then in production.



A good reputation brings profits – advertisements for Protos cars, 1926

In return, it was allowed to use the offices of SSW in Germany and abroad for the sales. However, even this measure did not really help, and the N.A.G. was forced to cease production in 1934. With this the history of automobile production at Siemens came to an end. And Karlheinz Kaske would certainly have remembered this difficult episode in Siemens' history while he was being interviewed in 1986.

Further information

www.siemens.com/history